The Orient and the Occident in the Recent Indian English Novels: A Study of The *Inscrutable Americans, Making the Minister Smile, Fasting, Feasting, The Romantics: A Novel* and *Chains*

In this study the paradigmatic shift of the nature of the East-West encounter depicted in five Indian English novels is analysed. Indian English Literature has acquired a distinctive generic identity of its own and it definitely reflects the nuanced aspects of the East-West encounters and their extensions. How the West looks upon the East and vice-versa is a curious theme in Indian English novels. Five Indian English novels published in the period spanning from 1990 to 2000—*The Inscrutable Americans* (1991) and *Making the Minister Smile* (1996) by Anurag Mathur, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai, *The Romantics: A Novel* (2000) by Pankaj Mishra and *Chains* (2000) by G.B.Prabhat—are hall-marked as novels of the East-West encounter in *Indian English Literature 1980 to 2000: A Critical Survey*. The East in all these novels is India while the West in all the novels except one, is America. In fact, after the age of territorial colonization, geographical and cultural displacement and the celebration of hybridity have made the spatial and temporal irrelevant. Now the exploited and the exploiters are topographically well mixed up. Thus it becomes clear that the dyad, the West and the East, are not strictly geographical locales and they represent certain codes of culture and tradition.

A brief study of the background of the introduction of English education in India, its objectives and the present subjectivity of the English language and the Indian English Literature forms the first chapter of the work. The West's encounter with the rest of the world began with territorial aggression and exploitation. The introduction of the study of English Literature in India by the colonial Britain evidently was with hegemonic designs so as to bring the natives into the European discursive network. It always insisted on the "European superiority" and the "Oriental inferiority". But "English Education" in India was also counterproductive and it gave

an impetus to the colonized to seek an increasing awareness of self-identity. Later, the language lost the stamp of any imperialistic designs and has developed as the language of Science, Trade and Commerce, Library, Information and Technology and as the language of global currency with great employment potentiality. Other reasons to discard the idea of a total rejection of "English" are the fear of self-alienation and the possibility of a kind of fascism which may arise by over-riding nationalism.

Three postcolonial assumptions for the study along with a critical study of the novels form the second chapter of the work. Although the novels do not show signs of compartmentalized encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, they reflect a mild but notable paradigmatic shift in the thematic concerns of the encounter. So the study has focused on the thematic reflections of the major issues like Gender, Economy, Social and private life, Religion and spirituality and Sex and romance. But, to look merely for essentialized representations of the Occident or the Orient in relation to these major aspects in the novels would be over-simplification. So the study has focused on three different postcolonial arguments which are very much relevant to the novels under study.

The first premise is about the very intention behind the Indian English Writings. It is often argued that the Indian English writers seem to write only for quick money and easy fame which their works could fetch. In fact many of them write to suit the dictates of the Western palate and use. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* puts almost the same arguments in a nut shell, giving the very recipe of successful Indian English novels and that itself forms the first premise. The second premise is about the still existing racism which most of the Indian English novels unfailingly reflect. As Fanon says in *Black Skin White Masks*: "White men consider themselves superior to black men" (117) and by extension the whites consider the Jews, the

Palestinians, the Indians, the Pakistanis and so on as inferior to themselves and this forms the second premise. The third premise is about the concept of modernity as most of the Indian English novels consciously or unconsciously speak volumes about modernity and development. Universalized concept of modernity where undeveloped countries are developed by the aid of the developed countries is already a past story and modernity has become highly problematized. Raymond Williams in *The politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* says that "modernism" even in art and literature has its centre in the "imperial and capitalist metropolis" (47) and so the third premise is that "modernism" which works in the capitalist mode benefits only the centre and the marginalized are conveniently occluded.

A close reading of the five novels in the background of the five major divides identified in the novels constitutes the third chapter of the work. All the five novels provide a space where indigenous characters mingle with immigrant characters so as to open up the possibilities of juxtaposing the global and the local. Among the five major divides, economy and concepts of modernity make a big gulf between the West and the East as invariably projected by all the novels under study. When gender issues in the novels are studied, discrimination towards the female gender can be seen prominently in the Indian scenario, whereas the West is not devoid of such notions. In the various aspects of social and private life the West seems to maintain a general poise, while life in India is more colourful with an overt expression of feelings and emotions. All the novels except *Making the Minister Smile* show Americans as reckless and impulsive in the matters of love, romance and sex whereas Indians are shown as subtle and designing in such matters. *Making the Minister Smile* provides a topsy-turvy picture regarding the issue. Religious practices and spirituality depicted in the novels also provide a realm where major differences can be pointed out between the Orient and the Occident.

An analysis of the tone and nature of the East-West encounter depicted in the novels and the impressions of globalization and neo-colonialism in the backdrop of the three postcolonial arguments make the fourth chapter. The study shows that the divide between the East and the West is not exactly of the dimension of binary opposites which does not allow the “twain” to meet. The essentialized binaries are increasingly blurred and common features shared both by the Occident and the Orient have become prominent. This in fact reveals that the geographical terrains could no longer be studied from a reductive two-dimensional perspective.

The reading of the novels in terms of the three postcolonial arguments which are already discussed as the postulates of the study helps to find out the canniness of “assimilation” which ultimately makes “one humanity” all over the world. As far as the first premise regarding the motive of the Indian English Writer is concerned the study shows that none of the novels under study yields to the allegation that the Indian English Writer essentializes exaggerated trifles to make quick money and fame. Indian myths, legends, god-heads or Sanskrit words are not used or misused for flippant, trivial treatments. As far as the problem of “race” is concerned, all the novels foreground clear marks of racial discrimination. The logic of the white man’s racial discrimination, which varies from simple curiosity to a blind prejudice with a ferocious urge to eliminate the alterity, can be seen in the novels. The displaced intellectuals from India feel racial discrimination and Eurocentrism as the palpable fact once they reach their coveted place. When the problem of modernity is analysed, the novels very well show how capitalism permeates across the globe in myriad forms and relegates the farmers, labourers, women and children into deprivation. The world as a global village thus has neoliberal agenda which protects the consumerist interests of the corporates.

Conclusion: The five novels under study generally focus on the topic of displaced characters searching for identity in an alien culture which inevitably leads to a sort of cultural encounter between the Orient and the Occident. But the obvious divides projected in the novels do not come under classificatory modes of essentialized binaries. Further the dichotomies are presented in a pleasant and humorous vein. In fact the novels are elusive, label-resistant texts but at the same time they slight the stereotypical "knowledge" about the binaries. The paradigms of dichotomies are fast changing in the modern world of increased mobility, interconnectedness and relentlessly ongoing globalization. The new world order of multiculturalism is swept over by globalization flanked by the boom in information technology and the media, especially the television channels with their entertainments and advertisements and thus the local is displaced to nullity. But when heterogeneity is nullified to the celebration of the homogeneity of the universal cultural hybridity or cosmopolitanism, the question—which culture prevails in the homogeneity—becomes relevant. Thus novels make the readers realize that hybridity, like universalism is also a dangerous reductiveness.

The highly problematic issue of "modernity" in the novels clearly shows that all the progress in science, information technology, neo-liberal politics, and industrial and corporate economies have not helped much in the sufferings of the less privileged across the globe. "Modernity" has helped only the welfare of the multinational corporate companies, industrial and business tycoons and the governments who promote them. The poor, the common man, the small scale industrial and business class, farmers, the labour class and the like are totally marginalized. "Modernity" works only at the centre and the peripheries are promptly kept at bay for ever, relegating the alterity into invisibility. But the novels also reveal a nexus between the abject neglect of the poor and the race of the poor, which actually problematizes the entire novels. The

study of the novels verily substantiates that the canniness of modernity is astutely linked with racism and this becomes the major finding of the entire study. This exposition of the study explains the space of discrimination and despair and that makes the enunciatory presence of modernity disjunctive. When Western/American cultural capitalism is reaching every nook and corner as the homogenous global culture, it certainly affects the economy, tastes, feelings, imagination, motivation, values and manners of the upcoming generations all over the world. Thus the study of the novels also unmistakably points towards the need to recognize and resist the nuanced dispositions of the neocolonial forces working in the global society of feigned multiculturalism rather than ending up as a lost world of divided self by succumbing to them.